
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

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AVOID BUSINESS SUPPLIES SCAMS

Assuming a telephone call is from the manufacturer's representative for office supplies can cost your business money. This is an old yet active scam that continues to find new victims.

The typical office supply scam involves goods or services that you routinely order: copier paper, toner and maintenance supplies, equipment maintenance contracts or classified advertising. Most business scams rely on an employee's lack of communication between the purchasing and the bill-paying department.

The scam usually works through telephone calls, the "supplier" will contact your business to gain information about the make and model of your copier or other office equipment. The caller sometimes gains the information by dropping the name of the owner, board chairman, or other employees of your business. Because the information seems so routine, it many times is given out without much thought by the person answering the call, and the call is soon forgotten.

When the scam artist contacts the business later, the caller uses high pressure tactics to rush your purchase decision and dodge questions about price, quantity and brand names. The seller may falsely claim that prices are going up soon, someone was forced out of business, a warehouse is overstocked, or a limited inventory of government surplus is available. Or that a computer glitch delayed notification of a price increase, but, as a courtesy, an order has been reserved for you at the "regular" or "old" price.

To make sure you don't get ripped off, make sure you and your employees follow these simple rules:

1. Instruct employees not to give out information about office equipment to callers with whom they are not familiar.
2. Designate one person who will address all inquiries about office supplies and equipment.
3. Warn purchasing employees to be suspicious of callers offering bargains that must be acted on immediately.
4. Make sure the order is in writing, with an authorized signature and purchase order number.

5. Instruct all suppliers to put purchase order numbers on invoices and bills of lading.
6. Do not accept any deliveries from a courier unless you know it is something your office has ordered.
7. If you don't recognize the name of the "supplier," don't pay the invoice without further checking.
8. Do not pay bills that fail to match your documentation.

This scam has been going on for years and results in businesses receiving high-priced, low quality copy machine supplies. Make sure all your employees are familiar with this scam and proper procedures are in place for ordering and confirming copier supplies.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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